

<https://helda.helsinki.fi>

pý The Nordic welfare state s value base and resili

Hellman, Matilda

2021-12-09

pý Hellman , M , Alanko , A & Olsen , T 2021 , ' The Nordic welfare state
resilience : A status update ' , Nordisk välfärdsforskning = Nordic Welfare Research , vol. 6 ,
no. 3 , pp. 125-127 . <https://doi.org/10.18261/issn.2464-4161-2021-03-01>

<http://hdl.handle.net/10138/337961>

<https://doi.org/10.18261/issn.2464-4161-2021-03-01>

cc_by_nc

publishedVersion

Downloaded from Helda, University of Helsinki institutional repository.

This is an electronic reprint of the original article.

This reprint may differ from the original in pagination and typographic detail.

Please cite the original version.

The Nordic welfare state's value base and resilience: A status update

Matilda Hellman

Research Director and Head of CEACG Research Unit, University of Helsinki, Finland

matilda.hellman@helsinki.fi

Anna Alanko

Coordinator and Deputy director, CEACG Research Unit, University of Helsinki, Finland

anna.alanko@helsinki.fi

Terje Olsen

Editor-in-Chief and Research Director, Fafo, Norway

Terje.Olsen@fafo.no

How are the Nordic welfare states doing? Will they be able to uphold the collective functions inscribed in their societal contracts? These are concerns that have long figured in the public discussions in all Nordic countries. While the puzzle of affording and producing good services has taken center stage as the biggest political question, social scholars have taken on the task of evaluating the systemic core values and principles that are threatened with the great challenges of our time.

Nordic welfare states are often discussed in the light of a conception of a historical past – a grand era – guided by values of universalism, social resilience, and inclusion. During the 1990s and at the beginning of the 2000s, this core essence was often referred to as an ethos. It entails certain main values inscribed in the Nordic welfare states' institutional, cultural, and political expressions. The ambition of this special issue of *Nordic Welfare Research* is to gather some status updates on how visions of a common value base are materialized in public policies, service provision and public discussions in the Nordic countries. We have asked: What sort of characteristics and functions are currently ascribed to the welfare state?

The articles in this volume shed light on these questions through comparative studies derived from specific fields of welfare state policies, such as residential care for children, work with refugees, help for persons with gambling problems and health care for substance users.

Kankainen and colleagues (2021) discuss how the gambling system in Finland, based on a combination of state grant and profit, exists side by side, and to some degree in contradiction to, the welfare state's function and roles. This system poses a moral challenge to the welfare state's contract between the citizens and the state. It channels proceeds from the state gambling monopoly to various third-sector fields: social and healthcare associations, art and cultural organizations and activities, science projects, sports and physical exercise, and youth work. For many reasons, these activities are part of the non-earmarked general

public funding. The ethical dilemmas involved especially concern the funding of a public good with money that stems from citizens' sometimes harmful and risky gambling habits.

Another interesting tension in the study by Kankainen et al. concerns the balance between particularism and universalism: the public sector service provision is expected to find a balance between the two, whereas corresponding for-profit and non-governmental organizations' services are not expected to guarantee this balance. This tension is also visible in Storbjörk and colleagues' contribution on welfare services targeted at substance use problems (Storbjörk et al., 2021). This analysis of the marginal service segment of substance use treatment (SUT) demonstrates diverging trends in service provider compositions in the countries under study. The authors point out systematic differences when it comes to dimensions such as the relative role of public, for-profit and non-profit providers of residential SUT. Their study generates knowledge on the ways in which smaller welfare and social service provision areas, such as SUT, "float along" with larger ideological trends such as market regulations and the use of private welfare providers.

The findings from Storbjörk and colleagues entail similar main points as the ones that are described in the analysis of services to refugees in Norway and Sweden by Weiss and Gren (2021). Data from interviews with "street-level bureaucrats", such as social workers, language teachers and caseworkers, express the ambiguity and moral discomfort that they associate with their everyday work. The analysis points out how welfare work, as part of a specific, yet wide-in-scope and complex service provision area, has over time become more contradictory and unstable. The combination of the principle of care for vulnerable citizens and the principle of reciprocal obligation between the individual refugee and the social worker puts the individual social worker in a dilemma between following their moral obligations and professional standards versus rigorously living up to bureaucratic practices.

In their article, Shanks and colleagues (2021) map and discuss the role of providers of residential care for children and youth in Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden. The study demonstrates that privatization of service provision is significant in all four countries, but this privatization is implemented differently in terms of participation of the public sector and how market shares are divided between for-profit companies and non-profit organizations. In Finland and Sweden, the for-profit sector has been growing since the 1980s and today dominates the field. Norway opened up for a residential care market to for-profit providers in the 1980s, but public and non-profit sectors have retained a relatively strong grip. In Denmark, non-profit providers maintain their strong position while for-profit providers still only have a marginal role. Thus, the Nordic countries have chosen different variants of the welfare mix in this particular field without undermining the general perception of the Nordic welfare model as a system that emphasizes universalism and de commodification.

Where the four countries are going, in a more overarching trajectory, is discussed in Hellman's article (2021). This analysis demonstrates how the welfare state is portrayed in the mass media in four Nordic countries in the 2010s–2020s. Even though some common features are found, the analyses show that the national discourses have taken different directions in the countries during this period.

This collection of articles points out that the Nordic welfare state – as an object to relate to and a standard to live up to – is still very much alive and kicking. Thus, one could answer the question posed in the beginning of this text with, "the Nordic welfare state is doing well, thank you". However, the contours of the solid and specific welfare state project in the four Nordic countries are becoming fuzzier. We might view it as a normative structure to which we compare developments and trends in welfare state issues. The fact that the systems are continuously subject to revision is probably the best expression of the models' viability and persistence.

References

- Hellman, M. (2021). How is the Nordic welfare state doing? Contemporary public constructs on challenges and achievements. *Nordic Welfare Research*, 6(3), 160–179. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18261/issn.2464-4161-2021-03-04>
- Kankainen, V., Lerkkanen, T. & Hellman, M. (2021). Mundane constructs of the third and public sectors in the Finnish welfare state – A qualitative analysis of the gambling profit-based public grant system. *Nordic Welfare Research*, 6(3), 180–191. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18261/issn.2464-4161-2021-03-05>
- Shanks, E., Backe-Hansen, E., Eriksson, P., Lausten, M., Lundström, T., Ranta, H. & Sallnäs, M. (2021). Privatisation of residential care for children and youth in Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden. *Nordic Welfare Research*, 6(3), 128–141. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18261/issn.2464-4161-2021-03-02>
- Storbjörk, J., Stenius, K., Bjerger, B., Enoksen, E.A., Kuussaari, K. & Pedersen, M.M. (2021). Restructured welfare service provision: For-profit and non-profit providers in residential substance use treatment in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden. *Nordic Welfare Research*, 6(3), <https://doi.org/10.18261/issn.2464-4161-2021-03-03>
- Weiss, N. & Gren, N. (2021). Mission Impossible? The Moral Discomfort among Swedish and Norwegian Welfare. *Nordic Welfare Research*, 6(3), 192-203. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18261/issn.2464-4161-2021-03-06>